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THE JAPANESE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

ITS PAST AND PRESENT

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BY

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AT THE THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL HELD IN THE CITY OF KYOTO,

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THE JAPANESE KUMI-AI (CONGREGATIONAL) CHURCH
ITS PAST AND PRESENT

The Christian denominations that are to be found in America and European countries are practically all represented here in Japan. The Kumi-ai or Congregational Church, it is needless to say, is but one among these denominations. In reviewing the history of its development in Japan it is not without profound emotion that we note at this moment, that we have assembled here for the thirtieth anniversary of the national council in the very city where we held the first denominational conference in the nineteenth year of Meiji (1886). These thirty years are no short space of time. The young men who were twenty years old at that time have by now reached their fiftieth year, and those who were then in their thirtieth year have really grown to be sixty years old. Looking back on these last thirty years we cannot but be thankful to our heavenly Father, when we remember that our missionary spirit has grown more and more ardent with every serious difficulty and obstacle that confronted us as we came along.

Historically speaking, the origin of our Kumi-ai body in Japan is to be traced back as early as the second year of Meiji (1869) when the first missionary family, Dr. and Mrs. Daniel Crosby Greene, were sent to this land by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in the United States of America. It was, however, in the seventh year of Meiji (1874) that the first two local churches came into being, viz, those in Kobe and Osaka, which respectively are those we call Kobe Church and

Osaka Church today. In the subsequent few years there were built several other churches of similar principles and polity, one at Sanda, a small town in the province of Settsu, one in Hyogo, another in Kyoto, and a few others elsewhere, adding thus a great deal of fervor to the missionary spirit that was burning in the breasts of the leaders, and their followers in those early years. These individual separate churches soon came to feel the need of combining their forces for the common cause for which they stood, and spontaneously proposed to call for a conference at which to organize themselves into a denominational body. Under these circumstances the representatives of nine churches, then in existence, met at the Baika Girls' School, a Christian school in Osaka, in January of the eleventh year of Meiji (1878) and in consequence "the Nippon Dendo Kaisha" or Japan Mission Society was organized for the purpose of managing the denominational affairs of our Church. The churches represented in this conference were those of Hyogo, Kobe, Tamon, Sanda, Naniwa, and Osaka, and the three churches in Kyoto. I myself happening to be a student at the Doshisha just then had the privilege of attending this first epoch-making meeting. Dr. Neesima, President of the Doshisha, was elected chairman of the conference, and the delegates from the nine churches numbered only twenty or so. That this assembly is not to be compared with this national council in size, we must admit, in spite of its epoch-making significance in the history of our Church. The meeting appointed as a committee the following three men, Messrs. Joseph Neesima, Paul Sawayama, and Ken-kichi Imamura, authorizing them to act for and attend to the business of the newly organized denominational body. The subsequent growth and development of our Kumi-ai Church has been fast and steady. The question of evangelization of the Empire was

the one most imminent and inspiring one in the mind of its leaders, enabling them to become more than conquerors of the difficulties that confronted them in the way. In commemorating this significant thirtieth anniversary, let us try vividly to picture to our mind the work we have done in the past, and thus to get hold of some of the most outstanding characteristics of our Kumi-ai Church which may be taken as our guiding principles in forming plans for the future, and for the advancement of the cause for which our denomination has stood.

1. Non-denominationalism.

I wish to make mention, first of all, of non-denominationalism, as characteristic of our Church. The "Independents" in England were a group of Christians guided by principles similar to ours, and the Congregational Church in the United States is practically identical with our Kumi-ai Church in both principle and polity. For some time after its introduction to Japan the "Christian Church" was the name applied to our Church, but several years later when the need was pressed upon us by the rise of other Christian denominations in Japan to characterize it, the denominational name "Kumi-ai Church" came to be adopted. The other denominations were designated by such names as the Presbyterian, the Methodist, the Baptist, or the Episcopal, which at the first glance conveyed some idea of their denominational characteristics or fundamental principles, but our Church had had no denominational title of its own. The pioneer preachers had no intention to preach denominationalism of any kind, and consequently lay-Christians in those early years were not interested in anything of that sort. It may be said in this connection that we

owe all this non-denominational feature to the American Board for Foreign Missions.

Just a word about the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. It was in 1810, that is, one hundred and six years ago that this Board was first organized, and the most distinctive characteristic of it was its through-going inter-denominationalism which we find embodied in the policy that they entirely disregarded the candidate's denominational connections, when there was one who applied for missionary activity in the foreign field. It is not infrequent that even today among the missionaries sent out from this board we come across Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Episcoparians, who still retain their former denominational connections. It is true that the American Board for Forelgn Missions is now under the control of the Congregational Church in the United States, as any other board is controlled by its denomination, but in its early years it was a sort of inter-denominational board. The central and most immediate interest was literally in the preaching of the gospel of Christ, and never in any kind of sectarian propaganda. It is quite natural therefore that here in Japan, also, the pioneer preachers and pastors never preached on the relative values or merits of various denominations. It is no wonder that ordinary lay-Christians really were not acquainted with the name or distinctive characteristics of their denomination. Here I might give an interesting instance, by way of illustration, of this singular phenomenon. A member of Imaharu Church in the province of Iyo, of which Mr. Tokio Yokoi was pastor at that time, once came up to Tokyo and had an embarassing experience. He was asked a question by a Christian of a certain denomination, saying "What Church do you belong to, anyway?" "Why, I belong to the Christian Church," was his ready answer. But the inquirer of

course was not satisfied and pressed on him another searching question about his denomination. After a moment's pause of embarassment something flashed on his mind, and he spoke out, "I am a member of the "Congro Church." It can be no doubt that he meant to say... a member of the Congregational Church" which he must have heard incidentally from his pastor some time before, but could not reproduce it quite correctly. Childish as it is, this short story may well help us to understand how our earliest leaders were intent on the preaching of the saving gospel of our Lord and nothing else. This non-denominationalism, I am glad to say, is not only the matter of the past but it is the life principle of our Church today, and I hope, will so remain in the years to come as it has been in the past.

2. The Self-supporting Principle.

It is noteworthy that from the earliest days of its organization our Kumi-ai Church was under the sway of the independent spirit, which is expressed most concisely in these brief words, "Evangelization of Japan by the Japanese." That we ought not to be supported by foreign money but should support our work for ourselves, was indeed the feeling of our Church as a whole. It is true that for some time after its birth our Church was supported, though in part, by The American Board, but this spirit of independence could not but express itself in some form or other when occasion came. In January of the tenth year of Meiji (1877) it was this independent spirit which compelled Paul Sawayama to declare that the Japanese should take on themselves the work of christianizing the Japanese. He had to struggle most bitterly with every kind of difficulties aud destitution, but finally succeeded in building Naniwa Church in Osaka which was entirely

self-supporting. It was not long after this that when a conference of all the missionaries in Japan was held in Osaka, he read before them a paper on "the Principle of Self-Support and Independence as Applied to the Christian Church," which was in fact the full statement of his long cherished contention regarding the matter in question. We must, however, remember that there was behind him a missionary by the name of Rev. Horace H. Leavitt, who had won and made him a champion for the self-supporting principle of the church. Rev. Mr. Leavitt was indeed a man of far-sightedness and rare ability, and boldly upheld the self-supporting principle of the church. In this matter he disagreed with his fellow-missionaries so widely that finally he was obliged to leave this country.

Again two years later, there came up another occasion when the first graduating class of the Doshisha were turned out into society. They were members of the so-called "Kumamoto Band," who as every one of us here knows, had been converted to the Christian faith under the influence of Captain Janes at Kumamoto, and vowed on a hill top called Hanaoka-yama near the city of Kumamoto to dedicate their lives and everything else for the evangelization of the people, and had come to the Doshisha to prepare themselves more effectively for their life work. When they were out they were ready to go to the uttermost end of the empire, and set to work with the fury of a lion, so to speak, forsaking their families and forgetting their own welfare for the gospel. Wherever they went, they upheld the self-supporting principle in building churches, and declared that no one was qualified for the task of church-building unless he could build it on an entirely self-supporting basis, and they literally put it into practice wherever they went. The succeeding graduates of the Doshisha courageously followed in their steps as they went out,

and their spirit was the same spirit of their predecessors. This spirit of independence thus under these circumstances grew stronger, until we find clearer expression in the famous resolution for self-support and independence, passed at the tenth national council in the twenty-eighth year of Meiji (1896) which naturally enough resulted in the decline on the part of the Japan Mission Society of all grant-in-aid from the American Board for Foreign Missions, and in the determination to raise money for the support of the churches from among the Japanese members and friends of our Church. This was indeed a most epoch-making event in the history of our Knmi-ai Church. Even after this, however, some local churches had to continue receiving some grant-in-aid from abroad. But at length in the twenty-eighth year of Meiji (1895) there came the day of complete triumph, when the national council gave a unanimous vote to the measure which authorised the Japan Mission Society to take on itself all the matter of financial support of those semi-independent churches to the last one. Here we may say that at last our long cherished contention has been fully realized. Such a bold step taken must have seemed to some quite reckless, and we hear of some people of other denominations who expressed regret for this apparently wildcat scheme of ours. We can hardly appreciate the greatness of the heart-breaking difficulties and distresses which leaders of our Church experienced in carrying out the resolution. It is impossible to be without tears when we recall that some of our friends have fallen victims of this great work, suffering from financial difficulties, but without these distresses and victims such glorious success and joy as is enjoyed by us all to day could not have been achieved. This spirit of Indspendence cannot but be one of the more outstanding characteristics of our Kumi-ai Chucrh.

We may still have to experience such difficulties and distresses in the years that are to come, but we must press forward with determination to bring to perfection this principle of self-support and independence.

3. Liberalism in Theology.

The next point I wish to make mention of is the liberal attitude of our Church toward matters of theology. It was in and about the twenty-first (1888–1889) or twenty-second years of Meiji that we were brought face to face with various new systems of thought, which were introduced from Germany when the so called "Europeanization Movement" had just begun to decline. The Christian thought then current in Japan was profoundly influenced by them, and it seemed at first as though it was shaken to its very foundation. Our Kumi-ai Church was probably the most affected of all the denominations. Even the leaders of the so called conservative orthodox portions were more or less affected, but it was chiefly the leaders of liberal type that were most vitally influenced. Some of them went so far that they lost their faith in what they had held in reverence, and thus consequently had to leave the church for work in other fields of human activity. Our Church was really in peril of a serious schism which seemed to divide it into two groups because of differences of opinion, and ensuing controversy among the leading members of our Church. We must, however, remember that all this was simply a manifestation of the general trend of the present age. This is the age of progress and everything in society at large is undergoing rapid and almost radical changes before our eyes. How can theology alone remain unaffected by these changes which are going on in the outside world, because theology is nothing but a sort of garment, so speak, of religion

itself which the life in man is destined to outgrow sooner or later. Such was no unique experience of ours but merely a repetition of what our parental churches in the West had experienced some time before us. It must be a great credit to our Church that its leaders faced this most difficult situation courageously and perseveringly before any other denomination. "The ground gets hardened after a rain," as a Japanese proverb puts it.

The most important thing for the Church, both conservative and liberal portions were agreed in emphasizing, was that it should not try to find unity in any particular form of theological thought, but primarily in the faith of Christ and God. It is interesting to note in this connection that several years ago, when the question was brought up for discussion at the national council as to whether or not our Church had any theology of its own, it was agreed that it had not any such. But by this we should not mean that we have no definable theology, but simply that we ought not to have any fixed form of theology which should bind us permanently, because of the progressive nature of theology in correspondence to its thought environment. Ideas about God may change from time to time, but how can we imagine that God himself ever changes. Just think of a parallel case in the physical universe, that is, theories about the physical universe have been changing but it does not mean that the world itself has changed at all. And so I would contend that there is no danger, so far as we are united in the faith of God, even if we leave the choice of a particular view of God to individual judgment. Let us be one in the faithful following of Christ in the practice of self-sacrificing love of humanity on behalf of our fellow-countrymen. Then how can we say we must maintain strict uniformity of thought and abhor free discussion of theological questions?

Our Church is certainly broad enough to take in at once extreme conservatives of orthodox type and champions of liberal thought,but it is remarkable that to whichever side, we may belong we are all bound together closely through loyalty to Christ in the love of God and service to man, and are ready to cast in our lot with the vital interests of our Church at large. What I have been saying thus far is true because it is based on the fact of unity in humanity. Human beings differ in thought one from another just as their features differ. If differences are over-emphasized, and similarities over-ignored, then each and every person would have to be all alone in the world. If any one should ask how all members of the Kumi-ai Church can be so harmonious in brotherly fellowship and mutual cooperation, I would say in reply it is because our Church has no definite theology which needs to be defended as one would his life. It is indeed true that the council held at Nara in the twenty-eighth year of Meiji (1895) adopted certain articles of faith as standard, but these were such as could easily be accepted all over the world. These were nothing else than a brief general statement of our faith in Christ and God to which both conservatives and liberals would join in saying Amen. It would not be necessary for me to remind you how unwise it is to try to clothe thought with forms of an inflexible kind, for we know perfectly well that life needs new thought forms with which to express itself more adequately as it grows. We must be determined to press forward to accomplish our great task of christianizing the nation, being united in the common faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and leaving the matter of theological thinking to the individual's free choice.

4. The Real Resouceful Ability of Lay-members.

The fourth characteristic which invites our attention is the resourceful ability of lay-members of our Church. The progress of the church cannot be expected unless both the pastor and his peaple are well qualified for the building up of the church. Some churches may have a very good pastor while its members remain in a miserable condition in many respects, while others have a large number of efficient members while their pastor is not quite as efficient. In either case the true development of the church is simply impossible. It is a matter of course that resourceful lay-members really constitute a very important asset for the church, and that the church with a large number of members of real resourcefulness has good reason to be proud. What then is meant by a really resourceful member? He is the member with some vital experience in Christian faith, and at the same time with some command of material resources. The importance of living faith cannot be over-estimated in the life of the church as in individual life, but it cannot be denied at the same time it is often handicapped if not accompanied by some material resources. Material wealth is a very important factor in church organization, but it is not infrequent that wealthy members do not use their possessions for noble and useful purposes because they lack in the vitality of their faith. We should always be thankful to remember that our pastors are always backed by some really resourceful members along both spiritual and material lines. It was at the national council held in the Bancho Kumi-ai Chunch of which I am pastor in Tokyo, in the thirty-eighth year of Meiji (1905) that a very handsome amount of money was pledged on the very spot for the expences needed for the next year in carrying out

the so-called "Concentrated Evangelistic Work" program. This sum is of course nothing today but it was really a considerable amount of money at that time. It has been the custom ever since that time, and the amount of money pledged at every national council for the same purpose has reached several thousand yen. "It is hard for an empty purse to stand straight". But for the material resourcefulness on the part of lay-members such a remarkable development of our Church would have been impossible, however hard the ministers and their associates may have fought for the cause of the saving gospel. I believe that we have good reason to mention this resourcefulness of lay-members as a distinctive trait of our Kumi-ai Church. This characteristic is manifested in last year's statistics which indicate the sum total of annual expenditure to have been over 140,000 yen. This may be a small sum of money in the eye of the world, but it must be an enormous sum when considered as a sacred treasure dedicated out of love of God, and service to man by humble followers of Christ for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Three years ago, when I was travelling extensively in the United States, it was all to my great satisfaction and gratitude that I came across a large number of great souls among the ministers, but it was infinitely more inspiring that there were in great numbers lay-members who were really resourceful not only in the realm of the spirit, but also in the consecration of their material resources. The church does not exist for the minister but the minister for the church, which in other words, is nothing but a group of persons bound together by a common tie of Christian fellowship. The minister may change but the members will not. I am aware that there are a great many of such members as have served their church as "Pillars" for thirty years, forty years, or even for fifty years. This I believe

is the chief source of power and strength of the churches in the United States. Our Church is a Congregational Church, founded on a thoroughly democratic basis. If so it is indeed to the real resourcefulness of members that we look forward to for the progress and development of our body. We should be thankful that our Church owes a great deal of its services to these resourceful lay-members.

5. The Ardent Missionary Spirit.

"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations." This was the command of our Lord to his disciples who were appointed to be the preachers of his gospel. Our Church has been absolutely loyal to this Lord's command from the very beginning. Our loyalty has not only remained unchanged but rather has been intensified more and more as years have passed away. In the last four decades, the difficulties our Church has confronted have been really great, and, moreover, it had to deal with intellectual perplexities occasioned by the introduction of liberal thought, which were no less serious than the financial difficulties. Our missionary spirit, however, has grown more and more ardent with each new difficulty overcome, enabling us more and more courageously to devote ourselves to the task of evangelizing our fellow-countrymen.

"Having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?"

Our work was begun in this burning missionary spirit before which difficulties and setbacks have been just trifling matters. This missionary spirit is indeed the most precious possession of our Church. Closely related with this, one of our distinctive characteristics is that our Church has had a large number of strong leaders, perhaps in a larger measure than most other denomina-

tions. This has been noted not only by us, but also by others outside our Church. By these strong leaders I mean those who cherish in their breasts burning love for God and service to man, that is, those builders of the Kingdom of God who have dedicated their lives. Their superiority, in other words, mainly consisted in this vigorous missionary spirit. In attending this memorable thirtieth anniversary, I cannot recall without deep emotions the resolution passed at the first national council, which was the embodiment of a scheme for nation-wide evangelization, aiming "to put right men in their right places" in entire subordination of their personal preferences to the cause of the Kingdom. In consequence Mr. Tokio Yokoi left Imaharu Church in Ehime prefecture to render full services to the central office of the Kumi-ai Church; Mr. Tsurin Kanamori was called back to the Doshisha from his pastorate in Okayama to assist President Neesima; Mr. Danjo Ebina left Maebashi for Tokyo; Mr. Tadajiro Fuwa moved from Fukuoka to Maebashi; Mr. Tsuneteru Miyagawa and Mr. Hiromichi Kozaki remained respectively in Osaka and in Tokyo; Mr. Tasuku Harada (though not carried out) was to leave Kobe for Niigata; myself proceeding from Kyoto to Fukushima, one of the most strategic points in evangelizing North Japan. Some other minor changes followed. Every one of those mentioned above proceeded to his new post without a word of dissatisfaction as if he were returning home, and there started a vigorous evangelistic campaign. Whenever I look back on this great event, and realize that the same spirit which moved these pioneer leaders still remains our possession today, I cannot but feel triumphant and thankful from the bottom of my heart. This fervent missionary spirit we may be permitted to enumerate as characterizing our denominational body.

6. The Three Great Benefactors.

My address will not be complete if I fail to refer even briefly to the three great benefactors of our Kumi-ai Church, namely, Dr. Jerome Davis, President Neesima of the Doshisha, and Rev. Paul Sawayama.

No long comment would be necessary on how Dr. Davis helped Pres. Neesima in founding the Doshisha as his right arm or rather both his arms, and how he taught the students with his heroic spirit and exerted his influence over them by the fire of his burning, dynamic faith. Those who did come in contact with him always felt as though he had been their father, and never as a foreigner, confiding to him even what they would not tell their dear friends. And his attitude to his students was as to his own boys. It would not be too much to say that there was no student of the Doshisha who had not been influenced more or less by his personality. He passed away in his native land after a protracted illness, in an advanced age of seventy two years and nine months, but his spiritual influence will remain with us as long as the Kumi-ai Church exists.

Dr. Neesima returned from the United States in the seventh year of Meiji (1874) to succeed in the next year in founding the Doshisha, a school of professed Christian principles. His burning spirit, his modest attitude, his high patriotism, his martyr-like soul, all these personal qualities of his were deeply impressed upon those who came in contact with him. The impresses on them were so deep and favorable that they never have forgotten him. He was in fact the pastor of pastors, the evangelist of evangelists. The significance and bearing of his personality on the evangelistic work of our Church cannot be over-estimated.

Lastly, Rev. Paul Sawayama is the person who will always be remembered especially in connection with the independence of our Church. His heroic spirit as well as his self-sacrificing effort for the evangelization of the nation was a great motive power, and an infinite source of inspiration to our Kumi-ai Church. He was, however, a man of feeble health, and it was not infrequent that during his pastorate he suffered from blood-vomiting, and was in danger of death, and yet he kept praying in his sick bed for his friends, and used to meet visitors in such a peaceful air as if enjoying a spring breeze. This reminded them of ancient saints in Christ Jesus. These quiet but powerful qualities of his will remain engraved long on our memory in the years to come. These three great pioneers were, we believe, the gifts of God to our native land, but because of their special relation with our Church we ought to be thankful for our indebtedness to them as members of the Kumi-ai Church. This is the chief reason that I ventured to refer to them in commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the national council of our denominational body.

Thus far I have mentioned six points as most distinctive characteristics of our Kumi-ai body, that is, non-denominationalism, self-support, liberalism in theology, resourcefulness of lay-members, a burning missionary spirit, and the three great benefactors.

But what are to say about the present status of our Church? The Kumi-ai Church is the same Kumi-ai Church that has been in the past. There is nothing to add or subtract from the fundamental principles which were adopted in the very beginning of its organization. The same aggressive missionary spirit is ruling us as in the past. It is true that our Church has lately fallen somewhat behind other denominations so far as the figures of statistics go, but we are not primarily concerned about the gain or loss in the

comparative statistics of denominations, but rather in the actual acquisition of Christian leadership in the various realms of human activity in this land. We only need to go forward with determination to farther the principles which have been ours from the earliest days. "The past produces the present and the present the future." When I make thus a brief survey of the past and the present I can predict confidently that the prospect of our Church shall be as promising as can be in the future.

Before closing this address let us call our attention to the fact that this memorable national council is but one milestone set up to remind us of the great task of evangelizing the nation, yet to be prefected in the days to come under the guidance of the unseen Hand. I believe this is the only possible way to express our gratitude for the divine grace that has been so abundant to the denomination to which we all belong.